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ABSTRACT

Educational and training programs have been successful in recruiting disadvantaged young adults because they also provide other services (e.g., food, money, and shelter); yet, client participation in the programs is often minimal. Client lack of utilization of academic and vocational training programs can be categorized in three areas. These are nonparticipation, nominal participation (enrollment but noninvolvement in the learning experience), and discrepant participation (students' inability to apply information to improvement or mastery of life situations). In addition to personal reasons for lack of utilization, organizational barriers prohibit programs from moving clients beyond the level of nominal participation, and clients participate only to ensure receipt of other benefits. Utilization behavior can be enhanced by the use of effective and appropriate counseling support, an emphasis on auxiliary skills, and a focus on relevance and application of newly acquired skills to clients' life situations. (YLB)

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Making Education Meaningful for Disadvantaged Young Adults

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Making Education Meaningful for Disadvantaged Young Adults

A major goal of education, especially when directed toward adults, should be to prepare the individual to assume the vast responsibilities of adulthood, while fostering personal growth. However, for many, education has failed; they are viewed by society and themselves as failures.

The poor unemployed represent one segment of this population. Often they demonstrate an inability to exert significant impact on their life situations. This lack of control causes self and societal incongruence, which precipitates adaptive behavior that is often socially unacceptable. This phenomenon seems more prevalent in young adults, because this point in one's development is supposed to represent the beginning stages of the adult's ascension to personal and societal success. These young people often have greater hope of improving their life and exerting control over it than their older counterparts; but they seem unable and often unwilling to take full advantage of educational and training programs designed to improve their skills.

Much of the literature concerning these "hard to reach" students has concentrated on attracting them into educational and training programs (e.g., Darkenwald and Larson, 1980). On the other hand, many of these young adults do get involved with public social service agencies which often offer employment and academic and vocational education. These agencies are successful in attracting this population because they (the agencies) also address themselves to the clients' more immediate needs: food, money, and shelter. Yet, client participation in the training

and academic programs offered by these agencies is often minimal and the actual benefit an individual derives is less than we would expect. Thus, in addition to the recruitment dilemma, the concept of client lack of utilization of academic and vocational training programs must also be considered.

A Participation Typology

Lack of utilization may be categorized into three areas:

1. Non-participation
2. Nominal participation
3. Discrepant participation

The first category, which is most often considered, refers to the clients' failure to enroll in programs, or once enrolled, deciding to drop out. The second, nominal participation, refers to when the client enrolls in the program but does not actually become involved in the learning experiences. The student who attends class merely to satisfy a program requirement, but refuses to do any work, fits into this category. The key idea is that the student's participation can only be measured in terms of classromm attendance, because his involvement in meaningful classroom associated learning experiences is inconsequential. The third category, discrepant participation, refers to the students inability to apply information to improvement or mastery of life situations. The student has attended and participated in the learning experience, but is unable to make the connection between this experience and his individual life problems.

A number of reasons are offered to explain lack of utilization. Irish (in Darkenwald and Larson, 1980) indicates

that the least educated's goals are seldom dependent on educational achievement. They tend to believe that goals that are dependent on educational attainment are beyond their reach; thus, they develop other skills and strategies to help them cope with daily problems.

The clients' view of himself is also offered as a major reason for poor utilization by Brown and Kottler (1979). Because of repeated failures, the client sees himself as helpless. Irish (in Darkenwald and Larson, 1980) echoes this theme and asserts that lack of self-confidence and low self esteem, coupled with poor academic skills creates an attitude not conducive to participation. In addition, these adults tend to have numerous and complex personal problems; and they have not had sufficient help in clarifying their vocational and educational goals (Adkins, 1970 and 1973).

Organization Barriers

Another area of concern when considering the affects on utilization behavior is factors that are associated with the organization. As mentioned above, social service agencies often find it easy to recruit young, unemployed adults because they provide other services (e.g., food, money, and shelter). As Boshier (1973) states, these items represent the lower spectrum of Maslow's hierarchy, and are of greater immediate concern to those individuals than higher order needs.

On the other hand, many of the programs offered by these agencies fail to move most of their clients beyond the level of nominal participation. These individuals often participate in educational and vocational components of the program only to insure receipt of other benefits.

One reason for this is the programs' and/or educators' philosophy. Bergevin (1967) writing about adult education in general says that the teaching learning pattern often followed rarely addresses the needs of the learner. "He is a vessel into which certain information is transferred" (p. 89). Freire (1970), in discussing what he labels the "banking concept of education", presents a similar view. He states that the traditional philosophy of education sees man as having an empty consciousness. Therefore, education is the process that fills this emptiness. The human mind "is passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the world outside" (p. 62). Freire, unlike Bergevin, feels that real education must uplift the masses and lead them to initiate social change. "Man must learn to respond to the challenges of his environment, which will lead to him dynamizing, mastering, and humanizing reality" (1973, pg. 5). Following the same logic, Lee (1973, PP. 68-74), in his writings on Black education emphasizes that knowledge must be linked to the students reality. Understanding and practical application must be stressed if education is going to be useful.

Enhancing Active Participation

It is no wonder that many poor, young adults who do participate in academic and vocational training programs do so at the nominal level. Even when instruction is individualized, many programs and their instructors stress the acquisition of knowledge without regard to clients' expressed needs and applicability to their problems. This suggests that these programs assume that the mere acquisition of academic and vocational skills is sufficient to enable these clients to become more productive members

of society. Yet, experience has shown that these adults typically require more.

Utilization behavior can be enhanced by the use of effective and appropriate counseling support. Goodman (1981) examines the synthesis of adult education and counseling. He states that most adults who become involved with counseling do not view themselves as having psychological problems. Rather, they need help in seeking resources, life management, and planning and decision making (p. 466). He adds, "The need structure of most adults seems to be weighed far more heavily in the direction of developmental counseling and learning more effective ways to fulfill their needs" (p. 466). The synthesis of counseling and education offers an effective way of meeting these needs. "Often an appropriate response combines elements of both instruction and counseling. Both are learning processes" (p. 467).

It is this instruction/counseling process that can provide the impetus to move students beyond the nominal level. Through this approach students can begin to overcome many of the barriers that prevent full participation, as well as developing goals that are educationally oriented.

Application of Learning

In addition to emphasizing auxiliary skills and supportive services, these clients need practice in applying newly acquired skills to their everyday lives. Ulmer (1978, p. 54) states:

> When learning is viewed and practiced as an extension of and a condition of life, the adult student will learn faster. The learning will be concrete rather than abstract; thus, it is easier for the adult to

use and practice in his own life. Obviously, learning that is practiced is more readily retained.

Freire (1973) presents a model for adult education, used to raise critical consciousness and teach skills to peasants in Brazil. Freire emphasizes a student-reality-based approach. The educator must become involved with the students, developing a rapport and understanding of their life situation. The educator must present stimuli based on the students' experiences. This leads to discussion and analysis of their situation and movement toward utilizing learned information to transform their reality.

Adkins (1970, 1973, 1974) presents a model for disadvantaged adults to successfully participate in training and employment programs. This model is based on the assumption that adults who are typically involved in these programs lack mastery of basic life skills; such as goal clarifying and problem solving. Though these adults may participate in training and employment programs, their life skills deficiencies prevent them from taking full advantage of these opportunities. These adults are not able to integrate their newly acquired knowledge with their life strategies; so, they are incapable of utilizing their educational or training experiences to transform their reality. Their discrepant participation helps to reinforce the notion that educational or training activities cannot help improve their life situation. Therefore, they continue to pursue goals that are not dependent on education or training.

For the poor, young adult population, it is essential to have educational and training programs focus on relevance and application of knowledge to these individuals' life situations. These in-

dividuals are typically unemployed, unskilled, and nonproductive members of society. They are extremely disillusioned with themselves and society, and often become dependent on social service agencies, crime, and penal institutions for fulfillment of their basic needs. Likewise, these adults tend to develop long term dependence on these survival avenues. Since they tend to demonstrate an inability to make decisions that result in benefits to themselves and society, develop and achieve socially acceptable goals, and to fully utilize educational resources, a more effective learning process must be emphasized. "Adult education, if it is to reach persons with diverse and special needs, must expand from academic content to programs for creating a more satisfying adult life style" (DeJoie, 1979, p. 244).

The literature concerning lack of utilization of academic and vocational training programs by poor, young adults is scant. Most of the literature that treats the topic focuses either on non-participation or traditional skills training programs. Research concerning competency based education and functional literacy may provide valuable information to link to the concept of utilization. As Ulmer (1981, p. 56) points out, in his discussion of competency based education, adults want to learn and will if they are provided with a supportive learning setting and relevant information that addresses their life situations.

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